MARS HILL AUDIO

Friday Feature for June 26, 2026

Mars Hill Audio

Remembering David Cayley, 1946–2026

Synopsis:

Writer and Canadian broadcaster David Cayley passed away on June 10, 2026, at the age of 81. This *Feature* presents part of a conversation Ken Myers had with Cayley in 2024 about his book *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (Penn State Press, 2021). Cayley describes Illich's insights into the "instrumental attitude" that defines modernity, in particular the blurring of the distinction between mechanisms and organisms. Illich questioned the idea of viewing computers as a "tool" and realized that they actually have changed how we conceive what it means to be human: we now regard ourselves as organic machines. Cayley, an intellectual friend of Illich's who interviewed him for a series of CBC radio broadcasts in the 1980s (*Ivan Illich in Conversation*), argues that Illich is not as well read or well understood as he should be, given the depth of his insights into modernity. He says this is due to Illich's humility and faith; he trusted the fruit of his work to God. This interview was originally published on Volume 163 of the *Journal*.

Transcript

Ken Myers
This is the *Friday Feature* for June 26th. I'm Ken Myers.

Just yesterday, I learned of the death on June 10th of Canadian writer and broadcaster David Cayley. Although we never met, I'd long been an admirer of his work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where between 1981 and 2012 he was a frequent contributor to CBC Radio One's program *Ideas*. His work is certainly the most thoughtfully provocative radio programming I've ever heard, featuring graceful interviews, relaxed yet probing writing, and a voice that conveyed sincerity and integrity.

I can't remember the first time I heard his work, but it may have been while I was still working at National Public Radio in the early eighties. His use of radio to explore and convey the concerns of key 20th-century thinkers was a model for my own efforts with Mars Hill Audio, especially the long documentary that we produced some time back about the life and work of Michael Polanyi.

Among the many thinkers with whom David Cayley interacted were Ivan Illich, Northrop Frye, George Grant, Charles Taylor, John Milbank, and René Girard.

The program series that carried his work was called *Ideas*, and Cayley had a knack for recognizing how much our lives were shaped by words and concepts that we never took time to examine. Take for instance the 14-part series that Cayley produced called "The Origins of the Modern Public," which aired in 2010. This series explored how in the 16th and 17th centuries, what we think of as "the public" became an intelligible concept and a social reality. To produce this series, Cayley spent five years accompanying a group of American and Canadian scholars from diverse disciplines who studied and discussed the various social, economic, technological, and religious forces that re-configured how life was experienced in the West and encouraged citizens came to think of themselves as members of a new something called "the public." I recommend that you set aside some time to listen to those episodes, either on the CBC website or on David Cayley's site at davidcayley.com.

Unlike many broadcaster and journalists, Cayley was acutely interested in theological and philosophical questions, an interest that was evident in programs he produced on philosopher George Parkin Grant, on the Radical Orthodoxy movement, and in interviews with guests such as William Cavanaugh and Roger Lundin.

In order to understand David Cayley's remarkable talent, you need to listen to some of the programs he produced. So before sharing part of an interview I enjoyed with him just two years ago, listen to the opening of the series he produced on in 2002 titled "Enlightened By Love: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil."

[Excerpt from CBC radio program; listen to full series here]

That is the opening of the first episode of the five-part series, "Enlightened By Love: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil." It was broadcast on the CBC, and written and produced by David Cayley.

The thinker whose life and work attracted most of Cayley's attention for many years was Ivan Illich, about whom he wrote three books and interviewed many times. In 2021 his book, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* was published, and it was the focus of a conversation that he and I enjoyed in 2024.

Cayley first met Illich in 1970, when Illich visited the commune where Cayley was living. Years later, after Cayley had established an impressive career with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Cayley reconnected with Illich and a fruitful relationship ensued with a series of conversations — some of them for broadcast. Illich died in 2002, and in 2005, Cayley published *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich,* based on a series of interviews in the late 1990s.

The Foreword to *The Rivers North of the Future* was written by Charles Taylor, who wrote that Illich's account of the secularization of the West matched his own analysis in significant ways. "I have been working over many years to find a nuanced understanding of Western modernity. This would be one which would both give a convincing account of how modernity arose and allow for a balanced account of what is good, even great, in it, and of what is less good, even dangerous and destructive. Illich's understanding of our modern condition as a spinoff from a 'corrupted' Christianity captures one of the important historical vectors that brought about the modern age and allows us to see how good and bad are closely interwoven in it. Ours is a civilization concerned to relieve suffering and enhance human well-being, on a universal scale unprecedented in history, and which at the same time threatens to imprison us in forms that can turn alien and dehumanizing. . . .

Illich, in his overall vision and in the penetrating historical detail of his arguments, offers a new road map, a way of coming to understand what has been jeopardized in our decentred, objectifying, discarnate way of remaking ourselves, and he does so without simply falling into the clichés of anti-modernism."

The details of how that road map was constructed are meticulously presented in David Cayley's book *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*. Fittingly, our conversation about Ivan Illich was a very wide-ranging and friendly encounter. Since many people citing Illich's work today do so in the context of his reflections on technology — his conviction that tools should be made to serve

people rather than people serving tools — it was inevitable that my conversation with David Cayley should get around to Illich's understanding of tools.

David Cayley
He made a striking claim, which was that the idea of a tool, an instrument, in the sense that modern persons came to use it, did not exist before the — roughly speaking — 12th century, that it is a new idea. And the essence is that the tool is conceptually separated from the hand of the tool user — the artisan to whom it belongs and whose proper use is in a certain sense part of his being.

Aristotle speaks about an *organon* — it's organic — the tool as something that I can stand apart from, that I can use. And he links this — it's too much to go into here — to sacraments and to various other theological ideas, but essentially it's the instrumental attitude, the can-do attitude, that he thinks defines modernity. His claim is that in our time — and he specifically speaks of the early 1980s as when he became aware of it — and I should say before I go on that his theory of technology is about what he calls "symbolic fallouts": what do tools say to us about who and what we are, rather than what can we do with them, or what are they doing destructively, creatively, whatever. No, what do they *say* to us?

And in the early eighties he began to perceive that the cybernetic revolution, to give it a general name — I mean the computer revolution, which is gathering itself for decades before that, right? Which you can look at going back to the early 20th century; an epoch for him, to give an example, was Schrodinger's lectures in which the human genome is conceived as a kind of writing or digital code. So it's not just happening when you get your first desk computer.

But generally speaking, it's telling us something about what we are, which is that we're a *system*. And the character of a system is it lacks that critical distance between the tool and the tool user. I am inside the system. And I'm linked to the system by a set of feedbacks, so the system changes with me. So in a certain way, distance — he tried to use the term *distality*, which never really flew, but we can also say *transcendence*, the capacity to get outside — is lost. The user is part of the system. So that's very simple, but that was his idea in general.

KM
As you're describing, technologies tell us something about ourselves. The verb *inform* came to mind. Technologies inform us.

DC
Yes, exactly.

KM
Tools have been used well before the 12th century, obviously.

DC
Yes, of course.

KM
So there was some kind of consciousness or orientation toward hammers and saws. Jesus in a carpenter shop, I think, had some kind of orientation — but didn't have that modern instrumentality.

As I was thinking about his work, and his critique of technology, particularly — the difference between mechanisms and organisms as paradigms — I was thinking about that because of his critique of institutions. His critique of institutions is a criticism of a mechanistic structure rather than an organic one. We have families, which are are institutions. We have kingdoms. I mean a kingdom can't be a entirely bad thing given that use of the paradigm in Scripture.

But I wonder whether the difference is that between an organism, which involves membership and interrelationship that's mutually sustaining, whereas with a mechanism, you know, I can take a knob off of this recorder and put a different knob on and the recorder doesn't mind. So does the difference between mechanisms and organisms help—

DC
Well, I would say, first of all, that Illich is not anti-institutional.

KM
Right, right.

DC
Which is to say he's not an idiot. He recognizes that anything that is done over and over again is in a certain sense instituted — it's an institution. That we would not have the Scripture if it were not for the Church. So he's not some sort of romantic fantasist.

I think on the question of mechanism, his critique of institutions was that they had crossed this watershed, as he calls it, into counter-productivity. They had overdone instrumentality, if you like, and had turned against their users, but there was still — at least in some way, theoretically, let's say — a distinction between the tool and the user. What he said later was that even though these institutions were overgrown, still the school — let's take that example — was conceived as a tool. It was to do something. It was to accomplish something.

KM
Yeah, or an industrial assembly line is still a tool.

DC
Exactly, or a highway or whatever. So now across this watershed, into the age of systems, you are into a kind of *pseudo-organic*, because it's not a machine. He insists on that, right? Anybody who thinks a computer is a machine has entered into a fatal illusion. Right? It's fundamentally different, he says. I call it *pseudo-organic* because obviously you can't find a computer growing anywhere.

KM
Right, right.

DC
And yet it convinces us it's organic, and it convinces many friends of mine — who are acolytes, let's say, of Gregory Bateson — that nothing important is lost if we conceive ourselves as an ongoing information process on the model of a computer. So that's why I say *pseudo-organic*.

KM
Yeah. Illich's sense that some threshold had been passed to this system mentality — that was relatively late in his life, right? Late in his career that he sensed that.

DC
Yes, I would say it was after — well, he dates to the early 1980s. So those years obviously are hugely important in describing his career because those are also the years in which his project of a history of scarcity, as he called it, in which he thought his book *Gender* would be an epoch. He understood that book as essentially an essay in economic history, and instead it was understood by a rising tide of feminism as a pro-patriarchy, anti-feminist polemic.

And his standing as a kind of godfather to the social movements coming out of the sixties ends there, I think. There's a parting of the ways, and it becomes clear to him, and later to me, that this might take quite a long time. Because whatever one makes of the sixties — and whenever "the sixties" actually occurred, which wasn't always in the sixties — there was a spirit of beginning again, of, Ivan says, making a new world right now. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive" — there was such a moment.

KM
Christopher Lasch's last book — in fact I think it was published posthumously — was *Women and the Common Life*, in which he was critical of feminism for accepting the economic models that were present in modern society, that feminism had abandoned any possibility of disrupting or challenging the economic status quo.

DC
Yeah. I'm not quite clear on the relations between Lasch and Illich. Maybe they were just walking on the same path and not necessarily influencing each other or even taking much account of one another. I think they knew of one another. I haven't read that book of Lasch's, but it's exactly the same as the impulse behind *Gender*, right? So the moment of "aha" revelation for Illich was seeing that the women's movement, in its still unformed first expression, had the most radical possibilities. And that's what he expresses in *Gender*, right?

That the whole coming of modernity in its industrial form depends on the destruction of gender, right?

KM
And the destruction of family, finally.

DC
Yes, but essentially the idea that we're not all reducible to one thing: to sex, to labor, to all these categories that are established by Marx's time — that that is incompatible with an idea of gender, right? Which is a conception of duality in which there is an ontological difference. Things can be of a different kind, not reducible to one another, not interchangeable. And interchangeability is the premise of feminism.

KM
You mentioned in your introduction that his book on gender had been pretty much ignored. I actually ran across a summary of it on a blog in 2019 by Christopher Shannon, who's a historian.

DC
Yes, I know of his work.

KM
Yeah. It was on the *Front Porch Republic* website. He says, "Illich's text is full of provocative, fascinating observations, with many casual throwaway statements that call for book-length development." And I wondered whether that was characteristic of his writing, that he would throw these things in and not unpack them as much as would be helpful.

DC
Well, I think that's a quite interesting question. I found Illich to be a wonderful writer, but he wasn't well understood. And one of the epochs in both our lives was the publication of *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, which was a transcription made by a friend of his — [it] wouldn't have occurred to me to even do it — of the radio interviews I did in the later eighties.

And he — although he claimed to have never read it — did say that friends were regularly coming to him and saying they understood him better now. They understood the spoken Illich better than they had ever understood the written Illich.

But I think it was part of his humility, his chastity, his, as he said, attempt to "nakedly follow the naked Christ," to never make himself a writer, to deny the attribution of anything prophetic in his work, to actually embody his own faith in other people's ability to understand their situations, to not want to become the "fount of Illich-ism." And so he's dramatically different, then, from scholars that I admire. I mean Nori Fry, whom we spoke of, would be an example; but also, in an exemplary way, René Girard, who, from an initial vision, patiently worked out the implications, developed a body of thought —

KM
A school, as it were.

DC
A school of thought — and filled it out; and although the "Fry-gian," as it were, school doesn't seem to exist, there's certainly the Girardian school.

Ivan didn't want that, right? He wanted to float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. He wanted to say what he had to say and get out and then say something else and leave that behind.

So I guess in that sense, yes, he threw off a lot of sparks. The book that I published after he died, called *The Rivers North of the Future*, is quite telling in that respect, in as much as the conversations we recorded in 1988 ended with him telling me that he thought the entire history of the West could be summed up in the saying *corruptio optimi pessima* — "the corruption of the best is the worst."

You quoted by saying that I had prepared myself as carefully as possible, and I wasn't ready for that at all. I had no idea what he meant, except that I could see vast implications. And I literally pestered him as we grew closer, during the nineties, to spell that out. And aside from selected lectures and essays, he never did. So he finally agreed to let me draw it out of him via interview. It wasn't

really an interview in the sense that he more or less dictated it, and then in the year that he died decided he would allow me to publish it. That's the book that has put a younger generation — in theology and in other fields — on fire. But he never wrote it. He trusted occasions — that if I knocked on his door, then he knew that was the sign, that somehow it would happen, and if I hadn't knocked, it wouldn't have happened. He did not have a sense that it was up to him. And I think that was an element of his faith.

KM
The idea that modernity is best understood as a corruption of the best, which is the worst, that phrase —

DC
It's an ancient proverb.

KM
Yeah, it's a Latin proverb.

DC
He liked it in Latin, and you find it in that form in Aquinas; but you can find it in Shakespeare in another way, right? "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." It's an old saw.

KM
But to apply it to modernity —

DC
In his hands it became a revolutionary — and for me life-changing — idea, because I don't think that's been taken in yet. Charles Taylor, in his Preface to the book — Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher of large international reputation who was absolutely crucial, I think, in Illich's ideas beginning to get a hearing, because he was kind of a forgotten man at the time he died. And you can see that, for example, [in] *The New York Times* obituary: "a priest-turned-philosopher appealed to baby boomers in the sixties," right? I mean that's yesterday's man, right? This guy had his vote half a century ago. So Taylor pointed out that this was an original position. This was not a secularization theory, nor was it a Nietzschean, anti-Christian polemic, but it was putting

forward the idea that we live in a perversion of the gospel. So it's arguably, then, not possible to see through our form of life or to get out of our form of life until we've recognized that it is a Christian form of life.

And we think we have overcome Christianity — I mean, that's the Enlightenment again, right? The Enlightenment has made Christianity its scapegoat. And so now we're in the grip of a race of "super-Christians" — the "woke," so-called — who are deeply unconscious of the sources of their inspiration. So we're blind and in the dark until we begin to uncover the Christian roots of modernity.

KM
David Cayley, from my 2024 interview with him, which was featured on Volume 163 of our *Journal*. David Cayley died on June 10th at the age of 81. The book which was the occasion for our conversation was *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, Cayley's third book about Illich. You can hear more of Cayley's interaction with Illich's journey on some of the podcasts available at davidcayley.com.

That's all for this week; thanks for listening; I'm Ken Myers.